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Dark plumaged House Martins *Delichon urbica* in northeastern Siberia

by J.S. Ash

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During 13–15 June 1991 several House Martins *Delichon urbica*, on which the normally white areas of the plumage were more or less obscured with dark colouration, were observed close to the town of Anadyr (64°35'N, 177°20'E) in northeastern Siberia. This area is situated in the tundra zone and is beyond the eastern limit of this martin's breeding distribution as shown in Cramp (1988) and at the absolute eastern limit of it as shown in Turner & Rose (1989).

The birds involved consisted of a group of c.10 at any one time feeding round and over a small pool on the boundary of a rather busy airport. Snow and ice had apparently cleared from the area in the previous week or two, but it was not known for how long the birds had been there nor even whether the same individuals were present during the time I was there. Other birds were seen from a bus at Anadyr close to buildings, but they were not examined for dark individuals. Possibly all the birds were still on passage, for 30 mostly rather distant House Martins were seen feeding over a river at Kantschalan, c.150 km NNE of Anadyr, on 17 June. A few of these seen well enough were not discoloured.

Description of discoloured birds

No two of the abnormally coloured birds were exactly alike and the degrees of variation are described here:

1. White rump above, and below all dark except for whitish throat and sides of neck.
2. White rump above; all dark below without any indication of even where the edge of the white on the underparts was.
3. As no. 2, but with a trace of white on the throat and belly. This bird was bathing frequently, by splashing into the water from the air, and had some dishevelled remiges and rectrices.

4. As no. 2, but white rump almost obscured. This was the darkest form.
5. Almost normal birds, but slightly diffused dusky on the white underparts which were darker than in *Delichon dasypus*.
6. As no. 5 but darker below, but not as dark as no. 2.

Numbers of dark birds involved

There were at least six discoloured birds at Anadyr, and apparently another elsewhere. Records were as follows. 13 June: one each of nos 1, 2, 3 and 4 in a total of c. 10 birds at 09.00 h. At 17.00 h there were two of the abnormal birds (one each of nos 2 and 3). 14 June: one, possibly two, no. 5 birds in a total of 7 or 8. 15 June: there were only a few normal birds in the early morning, but later there were single no. 4 and no. 6 birds. In the evening at about 19.00 h a single no. 6 bird was present in a flock of c.30 House Martins at a lake, near what was named locally as Hill 150, at c.12 km north of the Anadyr site. This latter bird was also noted independently by Mark Van Beirs. 16 June: on two visits in the morning only two and one normal plumaged birds were seen.

Possible cause of abnormal colouration

At the time of these observations three possible explanations were being considered for the dark birds: (1) that they were melanistic genetic morphs, perhaps restricted to that area of Siberia; (2) that they were local birds contaminated by contact with a pollutant while roosting or perched; (3) that while on passage they had passed through an area of severely polluted atmosphere, such as that in the region of Kuwait.

The possibility of black morphs being involved seems unlikely. I have been unable to trace any other similar observations in House Martins, and the apparent transient nature of the occurrence also tends to rule out this possibility. This species tended to disappear in the middle of mid-summer arctic nights at Anadyr, and I failed to find where they went to: possibly they remained high in the air. Neither did I see House Martins sitting on wires or buildings, and I searched without success for any building in the area which was contaminated with a dark substance such as oil or paint. Similarly there was no indication that the pool used by the birds, or any of the other pools or streams in the area, were contaminated by a surface pollutant. Many waterbirds and passerines also used these wet areas, and no indication of any contamination was seen on them.

The last possibility, that contamination had occurred on migration, seems the most likely explanation. A possible source of aerial contamination in the spring of 1991 was in the Kuwait area, some 9000 km to the southwest of Anadyr, where a huge mass of polluted air from burning oil-wells covered a broad area. The drawback to this theory is that the race of House Martins in northeastern Siberia is *D.u.lagopoda*. According to Cramp (1988) this race is believed to overwinter from Assam to Indo-China, so that it is unlikely to occur in Kuwait, unless some part of the *lagopoda* population actually does extend that far west and even join nominate birds overwintering south of the Sahara.

Michael Evans of ICBP led a group which investigated in the spring of 1991 the effects on birds of the war in the Persian Gulf. He informed me (pers. comm., and Evans *et al.* in prep.) that the firing of the Kuwait

oil-wells resulted in the contamination of many migrant birds, including hirundines, while they were flying, moving about in vegetation, or feeding and resting in water. Affected birds had plumage discoloured by soot, including the underwings; the plumage was sometimes slightly tacky to the touch, possibly resulting from micro-particles of unburned or incompletely burned oil raised into the atmosphere with the smoke. An explanation for the occurrence of the dark birds in Siberia must remain within the realms of supposition at the present time. Further observations from this area are perhaps unlikely, but data from elsewhere might help to elucidate the matter.

Acknowledgements

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A new subspecies of *Cisticola bulliens* from northern Angola

by Alan Tye

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Lynes (1930) originally described the Bubbling *Cisticola Cisticola bulliens*, from a Type collected at Lobito, on the coast of Benguela Province in southern Angola. The species occurs throughout western Angola, north to Cabinda. Lynes studied the long series of specimens in the British Museum (Natural History) (BMNH) and noted that geographical variation was "very slight: not considered racially divisible." However, separation of the BMNH series according to locality shows the existence of two distinguishable populations; the birds from Benguela Province (including the type locality) are lighter in colour than northern birds. Therefore, I propose to name the latter

***Cisticola bulliens septentrionalis* subsp. nov.**

Holotype. BMNH no. 1910.5.6.750, adult male in non-breeding plumage, collected at Ndala Tando (9°13'S, 14°56'E), Angola, on 14 August 1908 by Dr W.J. Ansorge (collector's no. 428).